

**Culturally Relevant Community-Based Learning for Heritage Students of Spanish:
A Virtual Collaboration with Dual Language Immersion Schools**



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Abstract

This paper explores best practices of incorporating high impact educational practices (HIPs) such as community-based learning/service-learning into the heritage language (HL) classroom. Specifically, it presents the design and outcomes of a virtual community collaboration that 1) supports a dual language immersion program at a local elementary school; 2) promotes bilingualism in a place with limited racial/ethnic diversity; 3) provides heritage students of Spanish with culturally affirming opportunities to engage in HIPs; and 4) addresses a local need - the shortage of bilingual teachers by exposing students to teaching career possibilities. With sample activities and a video/website that documents the outcomes of the collaboration, the paper intends to promote the urgent need for world language education in the nation.

Keywords: high impact practices (HIPs), community-based learning/service-learning, heritage language students of Spanish, dual language immersion, bilingual teacher shortage.

Introduction

At a time of increased division and decreased commitment to world language education in the nation, colleges and universities have an important role in collaborating with K-12 schools to facilitate language, intercultural, and global learning and to promote equity and inclusivity. In the context of heritage language (HL) education, research calls for critical language pedagogy that offers culturally inclusive learning and equitable access to education. Although the growing number of HL programs in the nation aims to address the legitimacy of US Hispanic students' cultural and linguistic heritages and their educational needs, many heritage students of Spanish continue to experience marginalization and linguistic insecurities. Language programs have traditionally centered around the formal, "standard," and prestigious varieties of Spanish from Spain and Latin America, places where Spanish has enjoyed a dominant status unlike Spanish in the U.S. In the case of predominantly White institutions (PWIs), HL students may face additional barriers in higher education. Without a critical mass of Hispanic presence, these students may experience alienation while navigating the social and academic climate of institutions centered around the dominant group.

Although the discourse in higher education is focused on equity and inclusivity, insufficient support for underrepresented minority (URM) students remains a constant challenge. For example, research demonstrates that high impact educational practices (HIPs) such as study abroad, service-learning/community-based learning, undergraduate research, capstone experiences, and so forth, have a significant effect on student success, engagement, and retention (Kuh, 2008). Nevertheless, URM students have traditionally had more limited access than White students to these practices (Finley & McNair, 2013; Kuh, 2008).

The current paper examines the intersection of community collaboration to encourage and support promotion of bilingualism/multilingualism in a place with limited racial and ethnic diversity, as well as the creation of culturally relevant learning opportunities and access to HIPs that focus on the linguistic and cultural wealth of heritage students of Spanish (rather than their deficiencies). In particular, it presents the design and outcomes of a virtual community collaboration that 1) supports a dual language immersion program at a local elementary school; 2) promotes advocacy for world language education in a place in Indiana with limited racial/ethnic diversity; 3) provides heritage students of Spanish with culturally-affirming, community-building learning experiences; and 4) addresses a local need in which the shortage of bilingual teachers has become a barrier to world language and dual language immersion programs. Students who were enrolled in an advanced Spanish class for heritage speakers collaborated with a local dual language immersion second grade classroom, offering a 10-week virtual reading/mentoring session while also serving as Hispanic role models. This project also aimed to support the legitimacy of students' cultural and linguistic heritages and empower them to use, strengthen and maintain Spanish as their heritage language, rather than focusing on the deficiency model of heritage language and bilingual education programs. In addition, through the virtual partnership with the local dual language immersion school, the community engagement intended to foster positive identity development and expansion of career opportunities.

Dual Language Immersion Programs in Indiana

Dual language immersion (DLI) programs promote bilingualism by teaching content in two primary languages. In addition to English, the most taught languages are Spanish and Chinese. Programs are typically characterized as being either two-way, where two primary language groups (e.g., English and Spanish) are served, or one-way, where learners of one

language (e.g., Spanish or English) are primarily served. The amount of instruction in each language can also vary across programs, though typically, the model is 90/10, 80/20, or 50/50 with the partner language comprising more time in the earlier grades. Across the country, in 2016-17, according to the Office of English Language Acquisition, “[t]hirty-five states and the District of Columbia reported having a dual language program” (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). More recently, as of spring 2023, data on the DualLanguageSchools.org website suggest forty-three states now have a DLI program, with at least 4,894 dual language schools across the United States registered on their website.

In the state of Indiana, the first DLI programs began in 1994. As of summer 2023, the state has 40 DLI programs registered with Spanish as the partner language: 17 one-way programs and 23 two-way programs (Indiana Department of Education). Although the figure has been steadily growing, the number of elementary schools with DLI programs constitutes less than 3% of total primary schools in the state. Locally, the city in which the university is located, one elementary school began a DLI program in 2017. In the past six years, they have added one grade each year and will host DLI classes for K-6 grades in the 2023-2024 school year. Eighty percent of daily instruction is provided in Spanish and 20% is in English for Grades K-2. In grade 3, they transition to a 50/50 Spanish/English model. While the number of heritage speakers in this DLI program is increasing, there is not yet an equal number of heritage Spanish and English-speaking students, which makes this program a one-way model of instruction.

Many DLI programs articulate inclusion in developing bilingualism in both populations of students; however, several scholars call attention to the lack of access to quality bilingual education programs for minority students (Freire, Valdez., & Delavan, 2017; Palmer, 2010; Valdez, Freire, & Delavan, 2016). For example, Palmer (2010) notes the danger of DLI

programs “serving the needs of the dominant majority, leaving Latino and other minority students out of the picture, except insofar as their interests converge with those of the dominant majority” (p. 110). To address these concerns, the local DLI program is working with Hispanic families to demonstrate the benefits while communicating their mission statement for the DLI program to “advocate for linguistic and cultural equity in the classroom, the school and the district by disrupting monocultural ideologies to uplift multicultural students, their families, and their communities.” ([Westview Elementary School](#)).

While the school’s culture and teaching approaches are instrumental in providing a learning community that values multicultural engagement, deep cultural understanding, and appreciation, a greater awareness and more positive attitudes towards diverse communities comes with exposure to cultures and experiences unlike one’s own. Given that only 1.8% of county residents identify as Hispanic and given that the DLI program is still growing to achieve the 50/50 goal of heritage Spanish and English speakers, there is an opportunity to partner with HL speakers of Spanish as linguistic and cultural mentors to children in the DLI program. The collaboration is particularly important, considering 96% of districts in Indiana report teacher shortages (Loughlin, 2021).

Moreover, research showing that students of color benefit from having effective teachers with cultural backgrounds similar to their own (Dee, 2004; Ingersoll & May, 2011) presents another possible challenge for emergent bilingual/heritage language speaker success in DLI programs. As of 2020, although the Hispanic K-12 student population has grown to 12.8%, the 1.7% of Hispanic teachers in Indiana is disproportionately low (Hinnefeld, 2020). Indeed, one of the struggles that DLI programs encounter is finding bilingual (Spanish-English) teachers who

are also Hispanic. Thus, in addition to requesting HL college mentors, the local DLI program sought collaboration with the university in an effort to increase the pipeline of bilingual teachers.

A Community-Based Project Design and Implementation for Heritage Students of Spanish

Hispanic students enrolled in the HL class, Advanced Spanish for Heritage Speakers, at the university typically consist of second-generation Spanish speakers with parents who immigrated predominantly from Mexico. The goals of the community-based learning project (i.e., service-learning in this case) were to: 1) design and deliver a meaningful service to the community (e.g., linguistic, cultural, and mentoring support for children in the dual language immersion program at a local elementary school); 2) provide underrepresented minority students (i.e., Hispanic students at a predominantly White institution) with culturally affirming and high-impact learning (HIPs) opportunities that promote HL maintenance; and 3) address the shortage of bilingual teachers by exposing HL students to meaningful teaching career possibilities in programs such as DLI.

Developing and strengthening reciprocal partnership. At the core of meaningful community engagement is building mutually beneficial campus-community partnerships. Scholarship on effective partnership development for service-learning/community-based learning highlights several important factors, such as clear articulation of a broad mission and particular goals, roles, and responsibilities of the collaborating parties, as well as a focus on relationships that promote closeness, equity, and integrity (Bringle, Clayton & Price, 2009; Bringle & Hatch, 2002; Dumlao, 2020). In the case of partnership development between higher education and K-12 schools, Furco (2013) delineates additional factors critical for ensuring “internal legitimization” for high quality engagement and buy-in from K-12 educators. These include grammar of schooling (i.e., respecting school norms such as schedules, curricula, contractual

commitments, and so forth), depth of knowledge on the school's unique culture for trust building, authenticity that results from full participation and commitment by both sides, and finally, status projection of equitable power relationships conducive to democratic decision-making processes.

The university with its long-standing prestige of Teachers College programs in the state has maintained close working ties with local community school corporations. Thus, when the only district elementary school with DLI contacted the university for collaboration possibilities, the partnership development became a natural fit with shared interests and goals to promote bilingualism and inclusion in the local community, as well as providing students with quality learning experiences. During the initial exploratory meetings with the DLI teachers and administrators of the elementary school, university liaisons who worked with the school, and the faculty member teaching the course offered space to share needs and interests, possible collaborative tasks, and resources for implementing the community project. In the case of the partnering elementary school, although the benefits and successes of the DLI program have been recognized, the program faces several obstacles. First, the challenge of hiring qualified bilingual teachers has been a constant hurdle. Second, the program has not been able to attract as many children from Spanish-speaking homes as those from English-speaking homes. To make DLI become more accessible to local Hispanic families, culturally appropriate promotion of the program and communication of its benefits to the families were needed. For example, some Hispanic families fear that the DLI program would delay the English language skills development of their children, even when research demonstrates the opposite results. Third, predominantly Anglo children in DLI programs have limited contact with Spanish-speakers beyond their bilingual teachers. Thus, the busy DLI teachers welcomed opportunities for

individual sessions of their students to have direct contact with heritage speakers of Spanish from the university.

For college HL students enrolled in the course, the partnership also offered numerous opportunities, in line with the specific learning objectives of the course and the mission of the university. First, one of the main goals of HL education is to promote HL maintenance as learners build their HL skills. An important determinant for HL maintenance is related to positive identity formation (Beaudrie et al., 2014; Leeman, 2015). In this respect, the collaboration focused on culturally relevant and affirming learning experiences for US Hispanics (rather than focusing on their deficiencies, which is too often the case). It also provided these underrepresented minority (URM) students with opportunities to engage in HIPs (Kuh, 2008). US Hispanics, along with other URM students have traditionally had limited access to these practices such as service-learning/community-based learning (Butin, 2006; Finley & McNair, 2013; Kuh, 2008). Furthermore, by offering personal support to young children in DLI, college HL students served as role models and funds of knowledge. Finally, the collaboration offered the college students first-hand experience to reinforce the value of their HL and cultural competence while introducing them to teaching careers.

Going virtual due to COVID-19. Although the COVID pandemic severely limited experiential learning opportunities involving the originally intended in-person activities, it has also expanded and affirmed quality virtual collaborative possibilities. Instead of college students visiting DLI classrooms and working with children in-person, the activities centered around zoom sessions with a second grade DLI class. The virtual collaboration eliminated the typical transportation issues that demand more time and coordination work for college students to get to the service site. Furthermore, by aligning the zoom sessions during class time for both parties,

the virtual platform facilitated supervision needed for interacting with minors, as well as supporting and guiding college mentors during the zoom sessions.

Identifying the service product: Weekly reading/mentoring sessions. Upon discussions with the local elementary school DLI teachers and administrators, we identified a project that would be beneficial and doable for both parties. The service product was to deliver ten-week virtual sessions, for 30 minutes each, considering schedule constraints, attention span of the children, and so forth. The linguistic and cultural input centered around reading books in Spanish, which were recommended by the DLI teachers. Each DLI child's iPad was set up for the zoom connection, and children would wear headsets to minimize distraction.

Equipping and preparing for weekly virtual mentoring sessions. At the beginning of the semester, college HL students received two training workshops to better understand the context of the community collaboration project. A faculty member with expertise in bilingual education and experience working with local community schools guided the class on the goals, benefits, and challenges of DLI programs. Another faculty member in elementary education and bilingual education equipped the class with practical suggestions on working with K-3 children and lesson planning. Next, both groups of college mentors and second graders introduced themselves to each other by making and sharing video messages in Spanish (see a [sample video](#) introduction by a college heritage speaker). Then, both groups met via zoom for 30 minutes each week during the class time. They began with group greetings and then divided into breakout sessions in which two college mentors would work with two DLI children. Given unpredictable absences, pairing in small groups better ensured continuity.

Prior to each virtual session, college students took turns in groups to prepare a lesson plan in Spanish based on a children's book recommended by the DLI teacher (see Appendices for a

sample lesson plan). First, some basic conversation questions were developed, taking into consideration what would be appropriate for the age and the language proficiency level of the children. Then, the lesson included a pre-reading activity, time to read aloud a book in Spanish together, and a post-reading activity that checked comprehension and highlighted cultural content. The lesson plans were shared with the DLI teacher for any feedback. After the completion of the breakout session, the two groups gathered back and took turns to share what children liked and what was meaningful as a class.

Documenting learning outcomes for college heritage students. Reflection is a key component of community engagement work. Regular, structured reflection activities with timely instructor feedback not only help students connect their community service experience to specific learning goals of the class, but also offer a space for them to share emotions, questions, and needs that arise during the community project (Ash, Clayton, & Atkinson, 2005; Correia & Blesicher, 2008; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Hatcher, Bringle, & Muthia, 2004). In the case of language courses, oral and written reflection activities serve as a platform for generating meaningful language use while also creating accountability for community engagement (Pak, 2013). Thus, at the beginning of the semester, the class discussed the relevance of reflective activities, the structure of reflection journals, and the evaluation criteria. At the beginning of the semester, the class reviewed 1) the project goals and rationale, 2) information on the community partner, 3) the service product(s) and expectations, 4) a timeline of service activities, 5) outlets for sharing the class work with a larger public (e.g., a regional conference presentation, university presentation, and incorporating the work in students' CVs), and 6) guidelines on structuring written reflections.

Four reflection journals and a final reflection essay were collected during the semester. These writing assignments also offered an important vehicle to focus on language form (e.g., vocabulary, grammar, spelling, writing conventions, etc.) to strengthen their HL skills. Students were guided to describe their activities - what worked or did not work well and how they arrived at their conclusions, feelings about the project and what they learned (e.g., knowledge on bilingual education, DLI, language and cultural topics, teamwork, coordination/organization skills, interpersonal skills, community learning, self-awareness, advocacy for world language education, etc.), and any support needed. Regular class time was devoted each week to discuss their reflections and to problem-solve any challenges as a class and offer resources and support to one another. For the final reflection essay, students were asked to re-read their reflection journals and elaborate on how the experience met (or did not meet) the project and course goals, facilitated the use and maintenance of their HL, affected their evolving thoughts on what constitutes a good community service and meaningful learning, and influenced recommendations for future community projects and their interest in future community work.

Project Outcomes, Implications, and Limitations

Support for a dual language immersion program at a local elementary school. For the partnering school, the collaboration provided the children in the DLI program with an opportunity to connect with heritage speakers. Given the limited racial and ethnic diversity of the county, the project offered individualized Spanish language and cultural support to promote bilingualism/biliteracy. In particular, as Collier & Thomas (2004) note “[T]he respect and nurturing of the multiple cultural heritages and the two main languages present in the school lead to friendships that cross social class and language boundaries” (p. 11). The HL students served as role models for the young children in the DLI class. More importantly, all too often people are

unaware of DLI programs. In fact, none of the college HL students had heard about the program; the collaboration increased student awareness of not only the program, but also the benefits that DLI programs offer to Hispanic families.

Promotion and advocacy for language education and bilingualism. Quality DLI programs are instrumental in promoting bilingualism and intercultural learning particularly in places in Indiana with limited racial/ethnic diversity. At the end of the semester, several college HL students embraced the importance of advocacy as one student described:

“Growing up, it was hard to maintain my heritage language as I was put into programs that pushed English and diminished the value of my native tongue. Dual Language Immersion is impressive because it accepts and celebrates culture and the power of bilingualism. Seeing bilingualism gain importance in primary education is incredibly validating and gives students of all different kinds of backgrounds hope that the future is *bilingüismo/multilingüismo*.”

Furthermore, the collaboration resulted in additional post-semester community projects during the following semester’s Spanish courses in which many of the HL students were enrolled. These projects included the design, production, and distribution of bilingual promotional materials for the DLI program (see [website](#)) in the community and expansion of collaboration to another elementary school with DLI in a different area of the state.

Access to culturally relevant HIPs for college heritage students. In their *Tension and contention in language education for Latinxs in the United States: Experience and Ethics in Teaching and Learning*, Martínez and Train (2020) contend that “[i]nequality and inequity are at the heart of the ongoing state of emergency in language education for Latinxs” (p. 8). Calling attention to the historical patterns of ignoring the lived experiences of U.S. Latinxs, the authors

stress, “the pedagogical and ethical urgency of teacher responsibility and learner agency” (p. 34). Indeed, even with the advantages of having grown up in bilingual and bicultural settings, many HL students have been subject to a deficiency approach to language learning (Beaudrie et al., 2014). Their HL has often been subjugated to the “standard,” “prestigious,” and formal varieties of Spanish that academia assigned in the language departments. In this respect, an important goal of the project with DLI was to place heritage learners of Spanish in the position of abundance, rather than the place of deficiencies.

The project embraced the “capacity-centered approach” (Martínez & Train, 2020) to language education for US Hispanics that stressed the value and power of further developing and maintaining their HL for advocacy and their vital presence in the community. First, as the [post-project video](#) interview demonstrates, students articulated leadership development through mentoring and serving as role models for the DLI students. They also discovered new interests such as teaching, mentoring, and working with children. They became aware of DLI programs, the state of bilingualism/multilingualism in Indiana and the need for language advocacy in the nation (e.g., the US lags behind on its commitment to language education among developed nations). The community work also became a vehicle to strengthen the sense of belonging at a PWI (Pak, 2018) as students came together to support children and the elementary school’s effort to promote the only DLI program in the city. In addition, the project allowed HL students to add their experience to CVs and accomplishments for scholarship, internship, and employment opportunities. For example, after the semester, one student applied and received a community service scholarship based on her work on this project; another received a job offer from a school with a DLI program in her hometown. Finally, another student used her community engagement experience to apply for and secure a bilingual position at a Social Security Office in the area.

Pipeline for bilingual teachers. Although Indiana's strategy for meeting the DLI programs' needs includes recruiting bilingual teachers from outside of the U.S. such as Spain, Puerto Rico, and several Spanish-speaking countries in Latin America, there has not been enough effort to recruit and equip heritage speakers of Spanish in the U.S. To this end, the university and local DLI program collaboration intended to inform as many HL students enrolled in the advanced Spanish class about teaching career opportunities. It is possible to begin work at DLI schools, while enrolled in a licensure program offered by the university, often with significant tuition support. Although we do not have information on the direct impact on the pipeline of bilingual teachers, we underscore the intentional exposure of HL students to teaching opportunities in DLI settings as an important step to expose and recruit HL students for future bilingual teaching positions.

Limitations and challenges. Despite many benefits of community collaboration between higher education and local K-12 schools, the community work requires addressing a number of challenges. First, most HL students enrolled in the class were not education majors. Consequently, the project involved additional training and supervision for all activities for working with minors including background checks, mandatory training sessions required by the university and local schools for working with minors, as well as general lesson planning principles, which required interdisciplinary collaboration with faculty outside of the language department. This additional training better equipped students for the project and enhanced their comfort levels and interest in working with children in school settings. Second, although both parties had access to the necessary technology, at times, the internet connection was not always reliable. Third, unpredictable student absences had the potential of interfering with group activities and, therefore, required flexibility and adjustments. Fourth, to ensure quality,

community engagement work demanded more time commitment than traditional classes in order to form reciprocal partnerships and ensure quality service products. Fifth, given the increasing work demands placed on k-12 teachers, the university partner took responsibility for providing lesson plans to the teachers in advance for feedback. Finally, the focus on this paper is limited to college HL students and does not incorporate the voices of DLI children. Future research can survey DLI teachers to ensure K-12 perspectives.

Conclusions

World language programs at many universities and colleges in the U.S. have faced an alarming enrollment decline during the last several years. At this challenging time of declining interest in and commitment to world language education and bilingualism in the nation, there is a greater need for collaborations between higher education and k-12 schools to promote and support dual language schools.

The current paper examined the benefits of partnership with dual language immersion (DLI) schools and culturally affirming community-based learning for heritage students of Spanish, especially at predominantly White institutions. The paper highlights the importance of a reciprocal university and K-12 partnership via service-learning/community-based learning projects to support the only DLI program in a community with limited racial/ethnic diversity. The project provided HL college students with the opportunity to support a DLI program in the local community by preparing and implementing virtual Spanish lessons with DLI second graders on a weekly basis. In this one-way DLI program with more mainstream English speakers than HL Spanish/Emergent Bilingual students due to a community with a low proportion of racial/ethnic diversity, the HL college students were able to serve as mentors for second graders who benefit from interacting and building relationships with HL speakers serving as role models.

The community project further provided HL students with culturally affirming opportunities to engage in HIPs while strengthening HL skills and capitalizing on their linguistic and cultural heritages to build community. Finally, while it is too early to tell how directly this project will impact the teacher pipeline for DLI teachers of Spanish, the partnership exposed HL college students to both teaching career possibilities and the benefits of DLI instruction for their home communities. The knowledge and the experiences they are taking away about the benefits of such programs are invaluable.

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Appendix

Sample Weekly Lesson Plan for Virtual Mentoring

El plan para la sesión

El libro (Selected book): *Alma y cómo obtuvo su nombre* (“Alma and How She Got Her Name”) por Juana Martínez-Neal. (In this book Alma feels awkward about her long Hispanic name and her father explains to her the cultural heritage behind it.)

I. Conversación para conocerse (*to get to know each other*)

- ¿Cómo te llamas? (*What is your name?*)
- ¿Cuántos años tienes? (*How old are you?*)
- ¿Tienes hermanos? ¿Cómo se llaman? (*Do you have brothers/sisters? What are their names?*)
- ¿Cuál es tu color favorito? => Mi color favorito es xxx. ¿Y tú? (*What is your favorite color? My favorite color is xxx. And you?*)
- ¿Cuál es tu comida favorita? (*What is your favorite food?*)
- ¿Cuál es tu juego favorito? (*What is your favorite game?*)
- ¿Te gusta bailar? ¿Cantar? ¿Ver la televisión? (*Do you like to dance? To sing? To watch TV?*)

II. Pre-lectura (para prepararse con el tema del libro) “Alma” => screen share (*Pre-reading activity*)

- ¿Te gusta español? (*Do you like Spanish?*)
- ¿Te gusta leer? ¿Cómo se llama tu libro favorito? (*Do you like to read? What is your favorite book?*)
- ¿Me quieres ayudar a leer cómo se llama el libro? (*Do you want to help me read the title of the book?*)
- ¿Cuál es tu nombre completo? ¿Cuál es el nombre de tu padre? ¿Y su apellido? ¿Cuál es el nombre de tu madre? (*What is your complete name? What is the name of your father? And his last name? What is your mom’s name?*)

III. Lectura (=> leer MUY lento y claro) (*Reading together => very slowly and clearly*)

IV. Pos-lectura (*Post-reading activity*)

- ¿Quién es Alma? (*Who is Alma?*)
- A Alma, ¿le gusta su nombre? ¿Por qué sí o no? (*Does Alma like her name? Why or why not?*)
- ¿Quién ayuda a Alma? (*Who helps Alma?*)
- ¿Cuáles nombres te acuerdas de Alma? (*How many names can you remember about Alma?*)
- ¿De dónde viene su nombre? (*Where does her name come from?*)
- ¿Te gusta tener un nombre más largo como Alma? (*Would you like to have a long name like Alma?*)

- ¿Cuál fue tu parte favorita? ¿Por qué? (*What was your favorite part of the book and why?*)

V. Tarea y despedida (*Homework and farewell*)

- Pregúntales a tus papás de dónde es tu nombre (y de dónde son los apellidos de tus padres) (*Ask your parents where your name comes from and where their last names come from*)